



Sick at School: A Teacher's Battle Against Mold

Interview with Michele Fisher

SPEAKERS

Kendra Seymour, Michele Fisher

MF

Michele Fisher

00:00

So we had mold in student books, ceiling tiles that were all water damaged with black spots in the middle. And when I voiced my concern to the teacher who was next to me, she said, come here, I want to show you something. And we she brought me into a storage room, which was adjacent to my room that was filled with boxes of papers that were all water damaged. You could see the water line on the boxes. Everything was water damage. You could see the drip marks and the mold going down the building.

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Kendra Seymour

00:35

Hello everyone, and welcome to Your Indoor Air Podcast brought to you by Change the Air Foundation. My name is Kendra Seymour, and today we're going to be hearing from a teacher. This is very close to my heart. Some of you know that I was a teacher prior to my work at Change the Air Foundation, who was made sick from mold and water damage in the building she was working in, and how this really altered her health and her career and her life. So thank you so much, Michelle for sharing your story today.

MF

Michele Fisher

01:01

Thank you for having me. I appreciate the opportunity.

KS

Kendra Seymour

01:05

Now before we continue though, I do want to take a moment to say thank you to two of our corporate sponsors. Now their donations help keep our resources free, so things like our podcast, all of our awesome free downloads, our step by step support, along with supporting our work at the state and federal level, so that we can change laws and, you know, hopefully make it so that more people can breathe safer indoor air. So huge thanks to MV Restorations in Colorado and HNST Mold Inspections in New York and New Jersey. You know, their support of us and dedication to their clients by helping them live in healthy homes is just awesome. So you can learn more about those corporate sponsors or if you're interested in becoming a corporate sponsor yourself, you can head on over to ChangetheAirFoundation.org, and click on our corporate partners tab. Michelle, as I said, when I opened like when you and I first connected, not only did we bond over the challenges of being people who were made sick from, you know, mold exposure and water damaged buildings. But you know that teacher in us bonded, and I hate to say it, our schools have, by and large, and I don't think I'm exaggerating here, a real problem when it comes to indoor air quality. So between poor ventilation and proper filtration, you know, the mold and water damage, structural issues our buildings are getting older. I get more and more calls every day from parents and teachers who are concerned about where their children are going to school, where they're working themselves. And so your story is just it's heartbreaking to be honest. So I appreciate you coming here to kind of shine a light on this. So why don't you tell us a little bit about when this journey kind of started for you, and kind of when things began to change in the school you were in.

MF

Michele Fisher

02:53

Okay, sure, I think to start. I was in education for 25 plus years, and after the birth of my daughter, I taught in two districts. And after the birth of my daughter, I joined the district that we're going to be talking about today. I was transferred from a newer construction school to an older building in 2010. It was built in 1972 and still have the same carpet from 1972 in that building. I had heard, I think what was interesting is, prior to me going I had heard from other staff members that had taught in that building and giving me warnings about their inability to breathe, allergy, asthma, and, you know, unbeknownst to me, and what, what these types of situations can do for one's health, water damage, what it can do for your health? I fluffed it off and said, I don't have allergies. I don't have asthma. I should be fine. So didn't really give it another thought, and transferred in 2010 and this building didn't have air conditioning. Many Illinois schools do not. I was an interior room without any windows, and relied on the school's ventilation system to properly heat and cool and so from the inception of me starting in that building, many emails went back and forth complaining I'd walk into the room and I was in excess of 80 degrees, many days without, you know, fresh air or anything like that. But in 2015 my room flooded, and the room next to mine flooded as well. And again, knew nothing about health effects, and thought that the district was going to handle things properly. And so custodians were brought in. They, you know, brought in the machines to suck the water out of the very old carpet, threw away what it was that they felt was damaged. And I really didn't give it another thought, even though, since the inception of being there, my health was declining. I was seeing

physicians, and I was an enormous amount of pain, my health had gone downhill. So what stands out to me as the as the turning point for me was an April day in 2016 where the temperatures were unusually warm here, and there was a stench in my room, and everybody who came into my room could smell it. And so when the head custodian happened to be in in the building, I said, you know, can you can you come in here? Do you smell that? Sure, he did. And I asked the question, do you think that could be mold from what happened the year previous, and they were emphatic that it was not and so that started my quest of went to my computer, can mold make you sick? And lo and behold, every symptom that I was suffering was listed, and I found myself a physician that could help to diagnose and I was lucky enough to see him in June of 2016 and was formally diagnosed with mold toxicity and SIRS. Prior to that, from April until June, when school was was getting out, I brought my concern to administration. I felt I had a close relationship with administration, and brought my concerns to them. They came over to my room, they listened to my concerns and agreed to qPCR testing. At that point, I had been speaking with the physician and knew proper testing was necessary with the type of health concern that I had. They, at that time, said they were agreeing to do qPCR testing, dust sampling to see if there was any of these the mold DNA present. But what was done instead was a spore trap air test at 5:50 in the morning, when no students and staff were present. And so when those results came back, it said that everything in the building was clean, and notice went out from the administration stating they were aware of black mold concerns that were brought to their attention, and they were assuring the staff that they looked over the report and the absolutely no black mold was present in our school.

KS

Kendra Seymour

06:59

Michelle, I'm going to stop you right there, because if someone's listening and they're not as familiar with this, they may be wondering, well, isn't air testing what you're supposed to do? So if that's a question you have, I want to add some context to this. The reason why testing at 5:15 in the morning, before anyone is present in the building is that, over time, those mold spores, the fragments, if there's mycotoxins, anything, will eventually settle out of the air and onto surfaces. And if you're testing and I'm guessing, in the center of a room, so far from the floors and the walls, where there was water damage, where everything has settled out overnight, the sample may not be reflective of what is actually going on in the building, what's being kicked up into the environment. So that's sometimes called like an ambient air sample, or it's undisturbed. If they were to take an air sample, you know, a few hours later, after students had been there, or near the end of the day, you would get probably drastically different results in some cases. So that's why that right there is a red flag. But as a teacher, that was that on your radar yet?

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Michele Fisher

08:11

Um, what was on my radar at that point was I knew that I was needing dust samples and I knew that it was the incorrect type of test, but that was all that I really knew. And when they came back and said that, it was clear I had already been looking around for evidence. So I had mold growing in student books, not only in my room that that was flooded, but also in in rooms classrooms where there wasn't this water damage. So we had mold in student books, ceiling tiles that were all water damaged with black spots in the middle. And when I voiced my concern to the teacher who was next to me, she said, come here I want to show you something. And we she brought me into a storage room, which was adjacent to my room that was filled with boxes of papers that were all water damage. You could see the water line on the boxes. Everything was water damage. You could see the drip marks and the mold going down the building, going, yeah, going down the building, which was the shared wall of my room. My desk, actually, that I sat under was the supply vent that was shared with the room that I just described. So I was so, so sick. So this letter goes out that the building is safe and I don't give up. I request to meet with administration, and was given a time to go over and I bring all of these photos and show I said, I think there's some things you're not aware of. While you're you're stating that there aren't any concerns. Here are my concerns. And there was an immediate reaction. This person got on the phone, called the head of their custodial staff and said, meet me over at the school. I followed her back to my school and on the spot, they emptied that room of all of those contaminant, all those contaminated materials and when I tell you, my symptoms, like shot up. My skin was burning, my tongue was tingling, I like, just the weirdest things were happening to me that I had never experienced before. I had read the EPA guideline. I knew containment needed to be set up. I knew environmental controls, PPA, PPE, should have been used. None of it was used. I was told three truckloads were removed that day while students and staff were in session.

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Kendra Seymour

10:39

And yeah, and if you're newer to this, whenever you disturb mold like that, right, you risk aerosolizing it. And you know, the amount of spores and fragments and things like that that get you're talking tens of millions, probably even billions, of these spores and fragments are now thrown into the environment and settling throughout the building and on surfaces and materials. And that's exposure, right? I am so sorry. So they, they take it away, and, and then what?

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Michele Fisher

11:12

And, and no mention of that. So, so the staff was notified of the air testing that was done, but no mention of all of this that was found, right? So now it's the end of the school year, so all of this is we're running rounding up to the end of the school year, and get my formal diagnosis in June. My doctor says you need to go on FMLA. And things just continue to go south with my relationship with administration at this point. I used to perform or conduct staff development. That summer, I did one staff development session for new

teachers prior to officially going on FMLA, and learned that I would then be transferred to another building, I think, even older than the building that I was in currently. And as my FMLA progressed, my physician was not releasing me back to work unless testing and air purification would be conducted to ensure that I wouldn't have repeated exposure. And the district refused to perform any of that, so they were not in agreement with what my doctor was requesting. They did a walk around the building and did an inspection themselves, and deemed that there wasn't any water damage and that it was safe for me to return. And furthermore, was told that none of the buildings in the district would be tested now or ever. And so I didn't stop. I didn't seem right to me, and so I thought there had to be some governing body that I just wasn't aware of that had the answers. So I thought, okay, I'm going to contact OSHA. So I contact OSHA, and I speak with a gentleman, and I tell him my story and let him know that spore trap air testing had been done, but I was told that it was really important to get this dust sampling. He said, well no need to repeat, we'll, absolutely request that they do the dust sampling. And then weeks go by later, and I get the results of spore trap air testing again from OSHA. And so I call this gentleman. I say, I'm confused, this is not what we discussed, and he was confused as well. He said, Let me check into this, and I will get back to you. And when he didn't get back to me, I called again, and I couldn't reach him, but instead, got the head of Illinois OSHA, and they were aware of my situation prior to me even beginning to speak. So when, through conversation with OSHA, I again brought up, why are we, if we're, if you're going to insist on sport trap ear testing, can we at least have the testing conducted when students and staff are present, so that the conditions are similar to what students and staff would experience while in the building. They said that they would look into that and get back to me, and so I have a written report that says from OSHA that it doesn't make a difference when testing is conducted, because there are no standards for safe versus unsafe levels of mold as it pertains to my workspace. And therefore, you know, it my request was mute. So my question then to them was, why were you requesting them to do such a test? Because there's this false perception that you call OSHA. OSHA has someone come out. OSHA does this testing. Letters go out to students and staff that everything is fine and it must be just this person who's reported it that's crazy, but there aren't any standards that they're, so they're, they didn't have an answer for me. Didn't have an answer for me as to why they were performing that type of testing without the standards for them to adhere to.

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Kendra Seymour

15:32

I think too you said it that false sense of security to that they're relying on a single type of testing and completely ignoring the physical growth and the improper removal and the actual visible water damage and things like that. And what you're describing, I think, is something a lot of people who've gone down this road come to realize that there aren't necessarily laws protecting you, there aren't agencies. There aren't even necessarily, in most states, any kind of required training or certification. You know, the janitor is just going to rip it out. And we think that, you know, oh, well, we don't, we don't treat lead this way, and we don't treat asbestos this way, yet, we somehow treat mold this way. And while, you know, I understand

that schools are in this position where, if we admit this, right, they're worried about the liability. If they admit it, they're worried about the cost to fix this properly, and I know funding becomes an issue. Okay, so what happened next?

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Michele Fisher

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So, So I've never, I was never able to return. Over the course of this happened in August of 2016. I was formally let go from my position the end of 27, 2017 or maybe early 2018 for insubordination, for refusing to return to work, at their request. My doctor was requesting one set of, you know, he was requesting testing to be done and accommodations with air purification, and they were saying, we're providing you accommodations by just transferring you to another school.

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Kendra Seymour

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So you had to make a choice between your job and your livelihood and protecting your health, which was spiraling. You know, we didn't even talk about your symptoms, but you were very sick, and that is a choice that, like too many Americans are facing. And so you left.

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Michele Fisher

17:42

I left. And you know, I think if I would have known at the front of 2016 that this is where this would have gone, I don't know if I would have had the courage. I think I initially would have crawled back to work. It needed to, it needed to happen the way that it happened for me to be able to say, okay, I can't return here. But I did wind up two years without an income. I'm a single mom. I was the sickest I'd ever been. Like I said, I spent over 25 years. I had a very successful career. I was well respected at that time, I thought I was, no, I was, I received awards and all kinds of things. I was. And so that came to a screeching halt simply because there aren't safeguards in place. There aren't laws in place that protect workers, but also students. 330 students walk into that building every single day.

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Kendra Seymour

18:42

And are probably still walking into that building.

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Michele Fisher

18:44

Probably still walking into that building.

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Kendra Seymour

18:47

I think, go ahead.

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Michele Fisher

18:49

Yeah, I can think of certain faces of children with what I know now about this illness, I would I'm pretty certain I could identify students that were also suffering,

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Kendra Seymour

19:02

Yeah, and, you know, I think it's so common. And I, you know, once upon a time, thought that too, I don't have allergies, I don't have asthma, I don't have to worry about it. But I, you know, some of the symptoms that this causes, like in children, you know, it's, it's things that we wouldn't necessarily connect with mold and water damage, but there is evidence connecting it to anxiety and depression and ADHD and food intolerances, autoimmune diseases. We've, I think we've talked about some other schools in your area, and students with alopecia, all of a sudden, healthy athletes, seizures, you name it, and and all of these things can be tied back to damp and, you know, water damage moldy indoor spaces. And if you if you want to think about it in a way, you know, if you're one of those analytical numbers people, Dr Joseph Allen has a book, and he did the math, and the average American student by the time they leave high school will have spent over 15,000 hours in a school building, and you know, you think about that, and then you think about our teachers and their careers and the staff in that building, that's a lot of exposure, and what is that doing to their health and their readiness and their ability to learn and their ability to live vibrantly and healthy lives? I'm so sorry. So you ended up leaving. Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently?

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Michele Fisher

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Yes and no. I think, knowing what I know now, I think you do need to bring, you need to bring the situation to administration, because I have seen administrations do the right thing and have proper responses. So I do think that in that instance, I would have still done what I had done. But what I think I also know now is guarding your nervous system. So when you are impacted by this. It's the sickest, it's the most traumatic, lonely like it is, the hardest thing that you can imagine going through and and recognizing the toll that it takes on your nervous system, and that the nervous system really is feeding this illness. And so going through a battle with someone and having it be so negative, definitely, actually took a toll on my health.

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Kendra Seymour

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Yeah, and, I mean, there's so much tied up in that you're right. It's your health, it's your, you know, relationships, I'm sure, with your colleagues. It's, you know, your financial independence. It's this is something that can impact every aspect of your life, and it really is life altering in that sense. So, you know, I and we kind of alluded to this, if somebody is working in a school building, or really any building right now and they see a problem with maybe some water damage or mold, do you have any advice for them? Take it to administration. Should they start taking pictures, in your opinion? Like, is there anything that you words of wisdom you might offer them

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Michele Fisher

22:07

In my journey and trying to with my own situation, I did learn that the EPA has a program that will test for free and provide like recommendations for and this is specifically for schools, but for schools, but it has to be brought to them. So a team of people would need to bring this to them. They would need to have somebody that is spearheading that, and administration would need to be not they would need to know this, but I would recommend talking to others, because, you know, I was not the only person diagnosed with this in my building. So once I was diagnosed, there was another girl that was also diagnosed. There was a person who had cancer. Her oncologist asked specifically, are you exposed to any mold? I think that this could be as a result. So you start talking to other people and their concerns and and and gather together that way, and then look up those resources to see if that is something that you would be able to start with. I was not aware of that?

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Kendra Seymour

23:19

Yeah, and we can link to that in the show notes. I know what EPA link you're talking about specifically, so we'll link to that. But I think that was gonna be one of my questions. Like, you weren't the only one impacted. Obviously, you there was enough of knowledge in the community, amongst the staff and stuff that you had been told when you when you first started. And so there is, there is some power in numbers. There's some power in documentation. We actually have a resource through Vanessa Johnson. We did an interview with her. She is a lawyer and a human resource in human resources as well. And she wrote a piece that we published an article on ADA accommodations for mold exposure, things that you can start, unfortunately, in her experience as well. She ended up having to leave the place of employment. But you know, you know, we talk doom and gloom a lot, but there are places who are willing to do this, right? And so, you know, it's about taking the steps and the documentation to start. So we'll link to some of those resources too, for people, because there's some helpful information in there. So what changes, Michelle, because I know it's been a number of years now, and I I know for me, at least with a little perspective, you

know, I can look back and think you know what this is, what needs to change big picture, either at the state level or the federal level or at the community level. So what changes would you like to see happen as a result of what happened to you?

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Michele Fisher

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Laws. We need laws. We need government agencies that are not just making suggestions and going on this honor system as to, you know, just relying on the district to do the right thing. There needs to be regulation. There needs to be there needs to be laws. And I know that Change the Air, you guys are doing amazing thing. The Senate bill that passed in. Illinois,

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Kendra Seymour

25:00

in Illinois, yeah, first victory for us. Yeah, huge bill.

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Michele Fisher

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Yes, huge bill. And so I think that you know, definite step in the right direction. But I think you alluded earlier that you know we have asbestos, we have lead, we have all of these other contaminants that we know have health effects. Why is mold not on the radar?

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Kendra Seymour

25:23

Yeah, no, absolutely, yeah. And even, you know, you spoke to something you know, not just you know about having anyone, right? You'd mentioned it sounded like the custodians came in and they removed three truckloads of mold. Part of the reason why, you know, we were so thrilled with the Illinois bill that passed is it's, it's now requiring people who are remediating to have certain level certifications and insurance so that they know, hey, I can't just rip this out and walk through a building full of people, right? We need to set up some some containment and procedures and PPE and so that is a step. It is not the step it is not the step that's going to solve it all, but it's the first step in in trying to protect not only the workers who are doing the work, but the people who are going to be working and living in those buildings as well. It's, it's, really is so heartbreaking, Michelle, to hear you share your story and hear that others are impacted and know that, I mean, to your knowledge, do you know has anything been done with, with the buildings that you were in?

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Michele Fisher

26:28

Nothing, to my knowledge, nothing has changed.

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Kendra Seymour

26:31

Yeah. So one of the things, and I this, is why Michelle, I love you, because you have taken this now and you have kind of crafted a new future and a new career out of this. So can you tell us a little bit about what you've been up to these years since then?

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Michele Fisher

26:48

Sure? You know, out of every, I do think everything happens for a reason and prior to telling you what exactly it is that I do. I, in 2016 at my sickest, after spending 30 days in bed, I sat up one day and said, this is not going to be my story. This is not how it's going to end for me. And so I think what we focus on expands. And I really put myself in, on a journey of knowing that I would get through this and that this was going to be temporary and some, you know, some way I was going to land where I needed to land. And so I went for integrative health coach training to help myself to heal. And at that point, said, wouldn't it be great to be able to pair up either with my physician or this wonderfully kind IEP that I met, that my physician sent me to by the name of Larry Schwartz, of Safestart Environmental. And Larry and I he, he not only investigated my house, but we had kept in touch during this whole process that I was in with my school district. And in 2018 I contacted him, and we started chatting, and he said, let's meet for lunch and he offered me a job that day. And since then, I've been with Safestart Environmental. I joined him in 2018 Larry was working by himself at that point, and what I've learned is we have created a really great, synergistic working relationship with one another. We've grown our business. We have amazing contracted investigators that are investigating all throughout the US, and we have many exciting things that are going to come to fruition in the next 12 months that we're really excited to be able to roll out. But, yeah, I'm very thrilled. I would have had no idea in 2016 that I was getting ready for a career change, or that I would be helping to run a company, but that's where I am today, and so we we now, or what I do now is, is help people through what it is that I've experienced. I talk to people all day long, every day, that are in same situation that I was in. Many of them are school teachers. Talk to many teachers that are calling in, but most people are calling in from physician referrals, and it's an extremely rewarding position.

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Kendra Seymour

29:15

Yeah, there, I think there's something so powerful when you've been impacted by something like this, and then you turn around and help the person behind you navigate it. I know when, when I reached out having someone who's been there and gone through it, it is an important connection and immensely helpful, I think, to have someone who has that empathy and that level of understanding, because it's hard to explain to people, unless you've necessarily been through it, and if you're listening, and you listen to a lot of our podcasts, and Larry Schwartz sounds familiar. He did. He's done an amazing interview with us before. I think he's going to come back, because you guys are working on some some really great things that I think are going to help people and continue to help change the way we address indoor air quality, so hopefully we'll have some more to come with, what you guys are all working on in that arena, because I'm super excited to hear it. So Michelle, thank you so much for being here today and like for offering your story. I know it can be hard to kind of open up those wounds a little bit. You and I talked before we hopped on that when knowing what you know now, when you look back at everything like it's it hits you in a in the heart a little bit

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Michele Fisher

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Absolutely, yeah. It was hard to look through all of this. It was eight years ago, but opening up that book today was, yeah, it was hard,

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Kendra Seymour

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Yeah, yeah. When something you know impacts your life so much so that you it sends you down a completely different direction than than you ever would, looking back is always, you know, I think that gut punch, but thank you again for being here and for everyone listening. If you found this interview, you know, helpful in your journey, if you want to learn more about steps you can take to improve the air in your home or where you work or where you worship, or whatever it is, please head on over to ChangeTheAirFoundation.org, check out our resources. We have a great Start Here feature. If you don't know where to start, start there. You know, we have free downloads. We have great podcasts and great interviews like this. And while you're there, sign up for our newsletter, because it really is the great and fastest way to get great information like this directly to your inbox. Thanks again. We'll see you next time.